The Prairie Church

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By

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TO

The four congregations among whom I have labored in Christian service

St. Alban's Church, Oak Lake, Manitoba.
St. Stephen's Church, East Kildonan Road, Winnipeg.
Christ Church, Whitehorse, Yukon.
St. Paul's Cathedral, Dawson, Yukon.

THIS little story, "The Prairie Church," is the result of blending together the experience of two or three families.

In an age when the church is being freely criticized, it is hoped that the story may illustrate the place which the Church still holds in the lives of many of her people.

J. A. S.

THE PRAIRIE CHURCH

THERE it stands, easily discernible among the other buildings of the little western village. Indeed, there is many a farmer who will lead you out some evening onto a hill not far from his house, three, five or six miles from the village and point out to you the church spire standing like an unlit beacon against the setting sun. If he happens to be one of the early settlers, and a member of the Church he will give you something of its history. I shall tell you the story as it was told to me six or seven years ago.

"It was away back in the eighties that we came to this part, my wife and I. The railroad had not reached here then. We came the last forty miles with all our possessions packed on two wagons. For the greater part of the distance we had to put both yoke of oxen onto the one wagon and take it half a mile or so, and then go back and get the other wagon. Often we had to throw off the greater part of both loads to get

through a slough, and then go back and forth several times before we could get everything across. If it had not been that some of our friends had come out here the year before, and we knew that they were expecting us, I do not think we ever could have come those last thirty or forty miles.

"When we got here truly, the whole land lay before us, and it was difficult enough to choose. The river ran through the midst of the country, dividing it into two sections, one side open country and light soil, the other side a heavier soil covered with underbrush and in places heavily treed. Our friends had chosen homesteads on the open side. We remained upon the same side of the river, but we came down here into the valley with just enough of this high land to make sure of some crop even in the wettest year. For the first three years we lost nearly everything by frost; our friends were reaping good harvests and implored us to give up our homestead and come over nearer to them. We had almost decided to go, but we made up our minds to stay one more year. That fourth year we had a splendid crop. I have never since seen a finer crop of wheat. We got it cut before the frost. It was a very dry fall, and we got it threshed in splendid shape. Then fire came and swept across the

stubble; a high wind carried it across our guards, and there before our eyes we saw our granaries and the reward of four years of waiting and of hardest labor all in flames. Do you blame me that I came away out here onto this hill alone and sat down and wept? Not for myself, I can endure most anything; but for the thought of all the sacrifice those four years must have meant to my wife.

"But I started to tell you about our church. Well, I had to tell you this to show you how hard it was for us to build it. I do not claim to be a wealthy man to-day, but I could give a thousand dollars now more easily than I could have given ten dollars in those first four years. And yet we built our church. There it stands. If it should be destroyed by fire and we started out to build another I doubt if we would be able to raise the money to build a better one. One of the missionary societies in England gave us a grant amounting to about half the cost of the lumber, and we did every bit of the work ourselves. One of our men had been an architect, and he designed it. Some of us were pretty handy with tools. In the evenings we would drive in with our oxen, or more often walk, and work at the church until after dark. No one worked harder than our clergyman, a bachelor, who often

came home with us by turns after we had quit work and helped us with our crops the next day.

"I shall never forget the day the church was opened and consecrated, for we opened it free of debt. The Bishop was here, and the church was packed to the doors. My wife played the organ, and I showed the people to their seats. Oh! I often sit here on this hill alone and dream that day over and over again. I can see it all as clearly as though it was but yesterday. The Bishop went into the pulpit to preach, the eager faces of the congregation greeted him, and I can tell you we were proud of the church that we had built.

"But where is that congregation now? The Bishop himself is gone and another is in his place. Nearly all the older members who were in the church that day lie in the graveyard yonder; some have moved away to distant parts advancing as the frontier of this new country moved westward and north. The children who were there that day have grown up, and many of them now with families of their own have taken our places on the farm. That was a long time ago.

"We had no children then, but a baby boy was born to us a few years later. We had him baptized in the church, and when he was old enough he was confirmed. He always sat beside me while his mother played the

organ, and I think he liked to go to church about as well as his old dad. He was always a good boy. The farm was to be his, and the joy of my life was the thought that he would never have to come through the hardships that we have endured. You can see for yourself that the farm is one of the finest in this part of the country, and the buildings and the stock and the machinery are as good as could be wished. Then the great war came. Our boy was one of the first to leave these parts. He stayed to see the crops harvested and threshed in the fall of 1914 and then enlisted. He was on his way across the ocean the day we unveiled the honor roll in the church, a beautiful piece of carved oak with a brass centre on which the names of the boys who enlisted were engraved. The name of our boy stands seventh on the list. It was not many months before the stars and crosses began to appear after the names to indicate that they had been wounded, or that they had fallen on the field of battle. In the fall of 1915 we placed a star after the name of our boy. He was badly wounded and got back as far as England. We thought we were going to have him invalided home. But he pulled around in a remarkable way and went back again to France. It is almost a year now since the cross was engraved after his

name. Yes, our boy, the only child God ever gave us, was killed upon the field of battle. I am proud that I had a boy to give for my country, and I am proud that he has done his duty.

"Two Sundays after we received the news of his death we had a memorial service, and our clergyman (not the one who was with us when the church was built, we have had several clergymen since then), took as his text St. John 3: 16, and he said that not only was this war bringing our men upon the field of battle to realize more deeply than ever before the love of Christ and the greatness of the sacrifice that He had made in giving His life for others; but that many fathers and mothers were coming to grasp a new meaning of the love of God the Father in giving up His only Son to make that sacrifice. And I think I see it now, and that feeling that God has made the sacrifice of His only Son for us, helps my wife and me to bear the sacrifice that we have been called upon to make. But it has been hard. I cannot tell you what it means for us to see this farm, for which we both have worked so hard pass into other hands. I wanted to see my boy here in my place on the farm, and I wanted to see him take my place in the church. Then I think I should have been satisfied.

"But now I have just been talking it over with my wife, and I don't think we will put in many more crops here. The work is coming pretty hard on me. As long as there was hope that our boy would return we would have stayed to welcome him back, and to see him settled on the farm. But I cannot bear to stay much longer. The farm will pass into other hands. Likely we will move into the city and join some church there; but even the most beautiful cathedral can never mean to us what this little prairie church has meant. I cannot think what our lives out here in the West would have been without its influence, not only on ourselves, but on the whole community in which we have lived. And I don't know how we ever could have borne the message of our son's death if it had not been for our religion, and that we knew that our boy believed in the same religion. He will not come back to us, but somehow as I knelt at the communion rail last Sunday I could not help but feel that he was not so very far away.

"I have always loved my Church, but I never realized my need of it as I have done these last few years."

As I walked back to the village that night there came to me, too, a deeper appreciation of the value of

the little church and the things for which it stands. The church that can mould such a father and mother and such a son has truly made a contribution to its day and generation. A loyalty to the faith of our fathers such as this is the corner-stone in the foundation on which the nation stands.